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"THE STRAIT GATE," AND "THE NARROW WAY:"

A Sermon,

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Luke xiii. 24.—"*Strive to enter in at the strait gate, for many I say unto you will seek to enter in, and shall not be able.*"

THE principle of curiosity was doubtless implanted into our nature, for the most important purposes, and when restrained within certain limits, may be lawfully and profitably indulged. But, when transcending its appointed boundaries, it presumptuously pries into those secret things which belong to God, and which it has not pleased Him to reveal, it becomes, by diverting our attention from subjects of practical importance, a pernicious and a criminal waste of energy. It is upon this account that the scriptural writers uniformly discourage the disposition which men so generally discover, to become acquainted with those subjects which, doubtless for the wisest reasons, have been left for the present in impenetrable obscurity. And in the same view, our blessed Saviour, when on a certain occasion it was asked of him, "Are there few that be saved?" Instead of answering a question, which to say the least was useless and unprofitable, exhorted those who attended him to "strive to enter in at the strait gate, for (added he) many I say unto you, will seek to enter in, and shall not be able."

It is evident, from the passage in St. Matthew, parallel to the one about to be considered, that by the phrases, the strait gate

and the narrow way, our Lord means to designate that course of action which leads to eternal life. For he there says, "Enter ye in at the strait gate, for wide is the gate, and broad is the way that leadeth to destruction, and many there be that go in thereat: because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way that leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it." I say it is evident from this passage, that the phrases in allusion, are employed to signify that course of action which terminates in everlasting happiness. And the first thing which I propose in the discussion of this subject, is to show you the force of the comparison of the avenues to the eternal blessedness of heaven, with a strait gate and a narrow way.

The entrance into life then, is termed a strait or narrow gate, because it implies *restraint*, a *vigorous putting forth of all our energies*, and in some cases, *the sacrifice of the strongest and most fondly cherished inclinations*. In the parallel passage in St. Matthew, our Lord draws a contrast between this course of action, which he designates by the phrase the "narrow way," and the opposite line of conduct, which he expresses by the phrase the *wide gate* and the *broad way*—and which he so calls, because its characteristics are directly the reverse of those of the former. It implying licentiousness, not restraint, laxity of manners, not discipline, indolence and ease, not a diligent putting forth of energy, passive obedience to every wild and headstrong impulse, not the sacrifice of imperious and clamorous passions.

Thence nothing can be more just than our Saviour's comparison of a course of irreligion and vice, to a broad way, which is thronged by passengers. For granting, as we must do, that sin always sooner or later leads to unmingled wretchedness and infamy, granting that the "way of transgressors is hard," yet the commission of sin is easy and agreeable. It does not require for its perpetration, at least while the *habit* of doing evil is not yet formed, an irksome and painful exertion of our faculties. It is like driving before the wind, along a smooth and untroubled sea.

But the force of the comparison of the way to life to a narrow

gate, will perhaps more clearly appear, if we consider what is implied in the exhortation, "strive to enter in at the strait gate." The term strive, has great strength in the original. As used by the classical writers of Greece, it signifies *to contend*, to *toil*, to *labour hard* for the attainment of an object, and as applied by them to those who contended in the public games. As employed in the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Old Testament, which was made before Christ, by some Jews of Alexandria in Egypt, and as used by the New Testament writers, who in many passages have quoted from the Septuagint: the word signifies to *exert one's whole strength*. Thus in the book of Daniel, it is said of Darius that he laboured, he exerted himself to the very utmost, to deliver Daniel.

Taking this general definition then for our guide in the discussion of this subject, let us consider more particularly what is implied in the exhortation, "strive to enter in at the strait gate." With this view, I remark in the first place, that to strive to enter in at the strait gate, implies a diligent and unremitting application of our mental faculties to the study of the divine will. I think I do not go too far, when I say, that the great mass of mankind have a positive distaste for graver studies *of any sort*. If we may judge from their customary reading, we do not hesitate to say that such is the fact. What description of books are in most general request? Beyond doubt, they are those which are principally addressed to the imagination, and the passions, and which therefore cost the *reasoning faculty* as little effort as possible. The taste for grave studies, is not natural to the majority of men; in them, therefore, it has to be formed, and for want of adequate mental discipline in early life, it never is acquired. And yet at least some degree of mental application is requisite to him who would enter into life. As his happiness hereafter depends upon his obedience to the Divine will, he must, of course, apply himself to the study of that will. He must learn by the exercise of his mental powers, what God would have him to do. He must diligently investigate all the varied sources of divine knowledge. Has God made a written revelation of his will to mankind? He must sedulously explore

its sacred pages. He must, like the Bereans, *search* the Scriptures, to ascertain the character and purposes of their great author, his "*delight* must be in the law of the Lord, and in his law must he meditate day and night." He is faithfully to comply with the spirit of that injunction of the Lord to the chosen people, "ye shall lay up these my laws, in your heart, and in your soul, and bind them for a sign upon your hand, that they may be as frontlets between your eyes, and ye shall teach them to your children, speaking of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, when thou liest down and when thou risest up, and thou shalt write them upon the door-posts of thy house, and upon thy gates." This passage most strongly enforces the obligation of studying the revealed will of God; and this study of course, implies the exercise of our mental faculties, on a subject of the gravest and most solemn purport.

Now we have seen, that the most of our species have no taste for subjects of this description, much less for those which are of so abstract a character, or in other words, so completely matters of faith, as are the truths of the Bible.

And in addition to this consideration, *all* mere natural men, I mean *all* men, whose hearts have not been changed by the Spirit, through the truth, have a disrelish for *spiritual religion*, that is, the religion which controls the affections, which purifies them from evil, and gives them the mastery over worldliness and sensuality. The study of the word of God then, requires a sacrifice of mental indolence, a *superinduced taste* for intellectual and spiritual truths, which are not found among men of unregenerate hearts, and undisciplined minds.

And for the same general reason it is, that such men are no less averse to another duty, which is implied in the exhortation, "strive to enter in at the strait gate;" and that is the *digestion* of the truths of religion. It is not enough that we cast our eyes over the pages of the sacred volume; in the language of that most beautiful prayer, the collect for the second Sunday in Advent, we must "mark, learn, and inwardly digest them." We must make these blessed truths *our own*, by patient, and

habitual meditation, we must treasure them up in our memories, we must revolve them over and over again in our minds, we must feed upon them, just as our bodies are nourished by our daily food. We must view them in their mutual connexions and dependencies, we must consider them in their influence on our conduct and our happiness: by making them the subjects of *frequent* and earnest meditation, we must keep them *continually* before our minds, as the guides and the motives of every action of our lives. We must make them the standards by which we compare the state of our hearts, and our ordinary course of action. But who does not see that to do all this is no easy matter.

It has been said that to think is one of the hardest things in the world. And certain it is, that, to think *closely*, and consecutively, to lay down principles, and to deduce consequences, implies a degree of mental labour, from which the generality of mankind shrink, and to which nothing can bring them to submit, but a motive which addresses itself to them in the shape of some pressing worldly interest. Men of naturally contemplative minds, form exceptions to the bulk of our race, they belong to the more elevated ranks of our nature. And if you add to this, that, "the *natural* man receiveth not the things of the spirit of God, neither *can* he know them, because they are spiritually discerned," and therefore that the carnal mind, whether contemplative or otherwise, feels a decided repugnance to religious meditations; I say, if you consider this, you will perceive another reason why the avenue to eternal life is compared by our Lord to a "strait gate, and a narrow way." It implies *an effort of* mind, and a conquest of its natural repugnance to holy thoughts, which is a melancholy characteristic of that "carnal mind, which is enmity against God." But, to strive to enter in at the strait gate, further implies a state of mind which it is no less difficult to maintain: I mean that state of mind which is diametrically *opposite* to listlessness, to negligence, and to a feeling of security, that state of the soul, which supposes it always to be penetrated with, *a lively* sense of its exposure to the assaults of evil, that wakeful condition of

all the faculties of the spiritual man, which keeps him like the sentinel on the walls of a fortress, *always* looking out for danger, which never suffers him to relax his vigilance for an instant, and which prepares him to give the alarm to conscience, at the *first* indication of any movement hostile to his piety and his virtue. But as I said, this is a most difficult task. How much easier were it to drop down the current of life, in utter recklessness of our moral exposure, and in a drowsy insensibility to our danger of a moral wreck.

But there are other difficulties still, which beset the path to heaven, and which render it emphatically a "narrow way." For in the next place, we must valiantly battle it with the corrupt appetites and passions of our nature. In that strong language of the Sermon on the Mount; if our "right eye offend" us, we are "to pluck it out, and cast it from" us, that is those passions which are *dear* to us as a right eye; and to deny ourselves the indulgence of which, we should esteem our greatest unhappiness; must be unhesitatingly sacrificed whenever their gratifications were inconsistent with the demands of the divine law. We are to *repress* that pride of intellect, which would lead us to reject the discoveries of revelation, because they do not harmonize with our preconceived views of fitness, and of *right*, and with all the docility and simplicity of little children, be willing to sit at the feet of Jesus, and be taught of him. We must learn to subdue that pride of heart, which renders us unwilling to bow to the authority, even of the Lord Almighty. We must relinquish our fondness for the sinful pleasures of the world, we must repress all inordinate attachment to its riches, its distinctions, its most lawful enjoyments. In the powerful language of Holy Scripture, we "must crucify the flesh with the affections and lusts, the lusts of the flesh, the lusts of the eye, and the pride of life." We must cherish the self-denying and self-sacrificing spirit of our Divine Master. And like him, deaf to the interested pleas of indulgence, of selfishness, and of love of ease, we must be distinguished for our *zeal* and *activity* in promoting the glory of God and in ministering to the bodily and spiritual necessities of our brethren of mankind. We must

keep under our bodies, and bring them into subjection, we must be "*temperate in all things*," as those who strive for the mastery in the Olympic games, we must tame our appetites by *main force*, and in a word, "we must bring our whole moral and physical man, under the dominion of reason and of religion."

But the great work of our salvation does not *end* here. In vain shall we investigate with the utmost diligence the sources of divine knowledge, in vain shall we digest the contents of the book of salvation, in vain shall we inspect our hearts, in vain shall we examine ourselves by ourselves, in vain shall we struggle against the power of evil, we must "pray without ceasing," that is, we must not only address the throne of grace at stated periods, and in public assemblies : but constantly, every day and every hour, must we maintain a devotional posture of soul. We must *frequently* and fervently send up our desires to the mercy seat. The spirit of supplication must mingle with the whole current of our thoughts, and feelings, and a sense of our dependence on the sovereign Spirit, must pervade and control our system of life.

This indispensable necessity of prayer to the spiritual health and safety of the christian, is most forcibly, and beautifully expressed in the following strains of that sweet ode of Montgomery, which the Church has adopted into our collection of hymns.

> "Prayer is the Christian's vital breath,
> The Christian's native air;
> The watchword at the gates of death,
> He enters Heaven with prayer."

Having thus endeavoured to explain what is implied in the exhortation "strive to enter in at the strait gate," I shall now for a few moments direct your attention to the consideration, by which it is enforced ; and a most awful and impressive one it is. "Strive to enter in at the strait gate, for many, I say unto you, shall seek to enter in, and *shall not be able !*" It requires some reflection to perceive the connexion of this clause with the first mention of the passage, the motive which our Saviour urges to engage us to enter in at the strait gate, is

the *solemn* circumstance, that many shall *seek* to enter in, and not *be able*, that is to say, there is but *one* gate to the celestial city, that is *the strait gate*, there is but *one way* thither, the *narrow way*.

The eternal happiness of men, is not a matter of course, they will not be mechanically impelled into heaven in one undistinguished mass. All desire happiness hereafter, and cherish the hope *of attaining* it, and many in *their way*, actually make some efforts to realize it. But then, the *course they pursue* will never carry them to the "haven where they would be." On the contrary, it is that broad way which leadeth to destruction. They are trusting to their just dealings, to their almsgiving, to their freedom from coarse and brutal vice, to the general integrity and correctness of their deportment. The God they serve is the mere creature of their own imagination: he is not the God of the Bible, he is a being whom it is not necessary to worship, who may be systematically forgotten, and who will suffer his rightful supremacy, over human hearts, to be usurped by the objects which he himself has created. Now such persons, notwithstanding their desires, and their efforts to gain heaven, will fail of attaining their object, because they do not seek it in the appointed way, or as St. Paul expresses it, they know not God, and obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

There are others who go a step further: they wear the livery of the disciples of Christ, they observe with technical precision, the ordinances, and the forms of Christianity. But with these exceptions, it were very difficult to see *how* they differ from other decent and reputable people in the world. The way by which they would enter heaven, is anything but a "narrow way." You do not see them earnestly endeavouring to subdue their unhallowed passions, and their *unsanctified* temper. They are not more detached from the world than others; nay, they appear to be trying to gain as *much as they can* of this world, without losing their hold upon the next. Surely *these people* are not striving "to enter in at the strait gate," verily, they are climbing "up some *other* way."

You see then, *why* it is, that many will seek to enter in, and shall not be able, is that, either they do not strive at all, or they do not strive aright. What an affecting thought! How it should engage every one of you to ask himself, am I striving to enter in at the *strait* gate, in the sense which has just been explained? Am I striving to enter in at the strait gate? Am I diligently studying the divine will? Is *my* delight "in the law of the Lord," and in His law am I meditating "day and night?" Is it a part of *my* system of life to inspect the state of *my own* heart, and to try my character by the *only* infallible standard of moral action? Am I strenuously endeavouring to bring every high thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ? Am I strenuously resisting every evil propensity, and endeavouring to forsake every evil way? Am I labouring to "quit myself like a man," to rise superior to the blandishments of a corrupt and ensnaring world? Am I laying aside every weight and the "sin which doth most easily beset" me? Am I praying with "all prayer and supplication, in the spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance?" In a word, am I to be found among those in reference to whom it is said, "the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by storm?" Happy, if after this inquiry, you are enabled to answer it in the affirmative, for the unfading crown of glory, which awaits him that overcometh, will infinitely compensate, and more than compensate him, for his hardest labours, and his most painful sacrifices.

But perhaps you are ready to complain of the *difficulties* which are involved in the Christian profession. You would that the path to heaven, were *smooth*, and free from obstructions, and strewn with roses. You are disposed to inquire, why should God prescribe a course of action, from which we have such *strong* and continual temptations to deviate; and which therefore exposes us to such great danger of coming short of the mark set before us? Why were not his commands graduated more exactly by the weakness, and infirmities of our nature? Why should he call us to such incessant conflicts with ourselves? Why to such great jealousy over our most hidden

thoughts and emotions? Why to such a painful struggle against the current of popular opinion, and of fashionable example? I might answer these inquiries, by showing that the difficulties attendant on a life of piety and virtue, are *most* formidable at its outset; that Christianity is so far from requiring an eternal abjuration of all the quiescent pleasurable sensations, that it only calls on us to *restrain* our passions, within those limits, beyond which they cannot be indulged, but at the sacrifice of our happiness, and that she then suffers nature to take its course. But it is not my intention at present, to *dwell* upon this topic. I prefer meeting the objection on different ground.

I acknowledge then, that the gate of heaven *is* "a *strait gate.*" But then, so is the way to knowledge, so is the road to wealth, so is the path to glory. Is there any thing great, or good, on the wide earth, which may be purchased at no higher expense than that of a wish, or a sigh? But more than this, we find in point of fact, that men will submit; and submit cheerfully too, to hardship and toil, and to deny themselves much of domestic and social enjoyment, in pursuit of fortune, or of fame. The soldier for example, will renounce the comfort of his fireside, and endure the fatigues, and brave the dangers of the most vigorous and formidable campaign. The husbandman rises with the sun, toils and perspires at every pore, and literally earns his bread in the sweat of his brow. The student withdraws himself from the pleasures of convivial life, to devote himself, with the most indefatigable assiduity, to the acquisition of knowledge. To what then does the objection amount? Why simply to this, that the attainment of eternal life, is subject to the very same conditions as those on which necessarily must depend the possession of *any considerable earthly advantage.* But there is this difference between the two cases, and a very wide one it is. It is thus stated by St. Paul in his epistle to Timothy, speaking of the labours and sacrifices of the racers in the Olympic games, he says. "They do it to obtain a corruptible crown, but we an incorruptible." The Christian, and the man of the world, must both make sacrifices for the realization of their respective objects; but then while

the one, is in quest of those riches which "take to themselves wings and flee away," and which at best shall perish in the flames of the conflagration; the other will secure us the end of *his* exertion, a treasure in the heavens, which moth cannot corrupt, and thieves cannot steal. While the *one* is in pursuit of pleasures, which at length pall upon the sense, and "lose the power to please," the other, shall "pluck amaranthine joys from bowers of bliss;" while the one is toiling and intriguing for the perishable wreath of earthly distinction, the other shall have *his* name engraven upon the immortal columns of the heavenly temple.

What mighty inducements then have we not, to strive to "enter in at the strait gate?" These are no less than the glorious prospect of an *endless* life, a life in felicitating, and embellishing, and dignifying which, the God of Heaven will lavish all the wealth of his high attributes. Oh! in the view of these considerations, how ought we, my Christian brothers and sisters, to give "all diligence to make our calling and our election sure;" how ought we to fear, lest "a promise being left us, of entering into his rest, any of us should seem to come short of it."

And, for those of *you*, my dear hearers, who there is reason to fear, are yet treading "the broad way that leadeth to destruction;" bowing before the cross with contrition, and confiding in the promises of forgiving mercy, through HIM whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood "*immediately* begin the momentous work of your salvation. Remember that the longer you delay it the greater will be the improbability of its final accomplishment. Religion operates on moral agents, according to the laws of their mental constitution. Now it is a law of our nature, that when our modes of thinking and of acting become habitual, it is exceedingly difficult to change them for opposite habitudes. And hence, when the habit of evil has become *established*, it is next to an impossibility to form a *holy character*. "Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the Leopard his spots." I say then "strive to enter in at strait gate." And it will never be so easy as it is *to day*, and as

the sun of to-morrow, may shine upon your sepulchre, the delay of a *moment* may prove fatal. "If thy hand, or thy foot offend thee, cut it off and cast it from thee, for it is better for thee, that one of thy members should perish, than that thy whole body should be cast into hell." If this be a *painful* duty, yet in applying thyself to it in good *earnest*, thou shalt experience the fulfilment of those animating promises, "my grace is sufficient for thee, as thy day is, so shall thy strength be," and God will make *his* strength *perfect* in his servant's *weakness*. Therefore "STRIVE TO ENTER IN AT THE STRAIT GATE." Amen.